FOUNDATIONS FOR FARMING:

A Broad Based Farming Initiative in Rural Zimbabwe.

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Africa College International Food Security, Health and Impact Knowledge Brokering Conference:
Devonshire Hall, University of Leeds, United Kingdom; 22 – 24 June 2011
Submitted for The Global Native (www.theglobalnative.org.uk)

ABSTRACT: [2]

This papers questions the relationship (and limits) between research and impact in African agriculture. Through the case study of Conservation Agriculture, developed in Zimbabwe by Foundations for Farming, the paper interrogates the position of "knowledge" and "impact" and argues that it is in partnership with local ways of knowing that true "impact" can be achieved.

Introduction:

In Sub Saharan Africa (SSA), the concept of food security is not isolated from the basic concept of development, this work marches hand in hand. Consequently, since the beginning of the postcolonial period, *"development has been for most SSA nations the most important reason for state"* (Gupta, 1997). With "neutral" promises of modernity, development provided the young states a means for power consolidation and legitimacy among historically incompatible groups as they emerged as *"the main engines of development, and communities as the main focus of them"* (Polvora, 2011). For this reason, through various state agents, as well as NGO´s and other local and international institutions, a range of "development approaches" have been repeatedly experimented on SSA populations with varying results leaning mostly towards failure. Research, in this equation has been the source that informs development "what" to do and which direction to transform societies, however, in the backdrop of failure, the big frustration has been the "how?" Research still struggles to produce 'impact' as most projects, including but not limited to food security, which seem to move along quite well in the presence of the implementing agent but once these projects "close", most communities revert to their previous state if not worse, leaving a negative impact if at all.

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2 This paper was submitted on behalf of The Global Native, a development research charity based in Leeds, United Kingdom.

Further, the agricultural sector in particular automatically became a development yardstick of choice as its state was believed to reveal a nation's underdevelopment. *"...If its GNP depends on agriculture and most of its workforce is employed in farms, then a nation is said to be underdeveloped"* (Gupta, 1997) and thus enforcing a negative stigma on agriculture as a development engine. This paper will focus on the fulcrum of the 'research / implementation' nexus, citing the work of Foundations for Farming (our Zimbabwean based partner organisation) as a backdrop.

Scope and background

Foundations for Farming started over 20 years ago by Zimbabwean farmer Brian Oldrieve but has existed for a short number of years in its current formalised state. In the early 1980s, Brian, having been a successful tobacco farmer, felt compelled to change his produce to staple foods such as maize as he felt that his product, though successful, was a potential harm to people rather than a help. In the process however, he lost his farm along with every assert he owned as no bank would support his new endeavour. Subsequently, through part research, part intuition, he developed a simple organic farming approach with astounding results. Conservation Agriculture is simple and requires little equipment and input making it cost effective. It works with and builds on the natural form and cycles of the soil, thus enhancing the natural resources and increasing the variety of soil biota, flora and fauna without sacrificing yields and high production levels as observed by FAO. By comparison, USA increased its yields from 4.5 tonnes/ha in 1961 to 10 tonnes/ha in 2005 through mechanisation and plant science while Zimbabwe decreased from 1.5 to 0.5 tonnes/ha in the same period (Annan, 2008). Through Conservation Agriculture, Zimbabwean rural famers have been steadily increasing their up to between 4 and 8 tonnes/ha depending on the region and soil conditions, with the highest yields reaching 13.9 tonnes/ha.

The Conservation Agriculture project initiated by Foundations for Farming has now taken root in 27 African countries starting in Zimbabwe and Zambia, it now forms part of the £60m DFID funded protracted relief program (www.prpzim.info) as part of the livelihoods, food security and nutrition program run in Zimbabwe by FAO. The farming program involves 23 implementing partners (NGOs) all of whom receive training from Foundations for Farming starting with 25,000 farmers in 2008, it reached 42,000 in 2008/09, and 114,469 in the 2009/2010 season. It has recently been accepted by the Government of Zimbabwe which approved the training of the Ministry of Agriculture extension workers, in addition, the Ministry of Education is training the first 55 schools to be carried out in the 2010/2011 season along with other governmental bodies such as Police and Department of Correctional Services. More directly, Foundations for Farming works with 11,000 farmers in 53 villages across Zimbabwe under the banner Operation Trumpet Call (OTC), which will form the focus of this paper.

The trouble with knowledge:

Historically, the research aspect of development projects has not been seen as being nearly as problematic as their implementation. Research assumes the position of "superior knowledge" and thus informs

development where the poor are and where they ought to be, it further describes 'how' best to move people from 'here' to 'there'. In this equation it generates various 'approaches' such as 'participation' which endeavour to covertly get communities to 'accept' the projects concerned and thus unwittingly sidesteps where people actually 'want' to be. By assuming the starting point as well as the destination, we are left focused on the "how to" aspect without realising that this position involves *"telling people how to live"* (Polvora, 2011). Therefore without admitting it we operate in a top down fashion in practice and most projects meet with local opposition as people 'vote with their feet' in resistance to what is mostly identified as "interference". While other projects have trotted along quite well while they make 'free' resources available, they then fall by the wayside once these have been exhausted leaving very little 'impact'.

Scholars of every persuasion currently agree that the failure of these projects, vis-à-vis, why research fails to achieve impact, lies in the practice, rather than the theory of development. Regardless how theories and policies have evolved since the 1940s, the practice and subsequent results have remained the same, revealing a schism between theory and practice. Knustad (2001) argues that *"...development is built on premises that no amount of reform can displace… [but] these effects are modified when the focus is shifted from development discourse to the practice of development"*. Structurally, development practice contains three problematic aspects that have remained unchanged since its inception, namely: *External intervention*: most projects are ill conceived by external agents with limited local knowledge and knowhow, social and otherwise. By identifying the 'problem' and 'solution' they prioritise based on what they see which seldom resonate with local priorities, and therefore 'miss the mark'. *Unbalanced power relationships:* wielding resources, most projects force march communities into 'participating' in the practitioner's vision, not their own, as such, these are enforced on a desperate 'target population' with very little say from them, it is seldom a dialogue but a monologue enforced through some form of power which distorts any possible 'conversation' of what local communities really want. *'Free gifts':* in the form of 'aid' or inputs used as incentives for 'project participation' mostly lead to disempowered and dependent communities that lack initiative. Things given for free not only 'indebt' the recipient (causing power imbalance), they further contribute to a dependency which robs participants of any true value in themselves or the project may have. What I call 'the dependency cycle' as communities outsource their agency for assistance at the cost of their initiative creating more helpless 'open mouths' (Ngulube, 2011).

It has since been argued that community "participation" is essential in achieving "impact", project acceptance and longevity. By impact it is generally meant how well the 'target community' adheres to and follows the vision of the development agent or whatever result the research concludes. Here I argue that beyond participation, agency is the key factor in improving the lives of the communities, and achieving lasting impact. This means 'unhinging' the community in question from the three structural lines of development practice as outlined above.

Between knowledge and action

Based on the above argument, it is important to separate two aspects of this project, first the 'research' aspect by which Brian developed and refined conservation farming (CF) the other is how this discovery changed the lives of communities - which is the focus here. When Brian discovered how well CF worked more than 20 years ago, he distilled it into a simple set of principles which he was determined to teach to local farmers. In typical fashion, he felt that everyone would be very excited and in no time the whole country would practice it and get out of poverty. He approached a few farmers first who tried it in small patches on their fields but failed repeatedly. After several attempts, it later surfaced that the method did not fail, however each farmer, having achieved good results, feared rejection by their community. In most of the communities, local jealousies and the very real threat of reprisal in the form of witchcraft was severe enough to reverse whatever benefits the idea brought its participants. He then approached a local school which accepted it as a "communal initiative" and this collective approach circumvented local rivalry issues which outsiders are never aware of. More schools joined the project after a while, but as he worked in different locations, he realised that in his absence the other schools regressed because they had not identified the project as their own, to them it was still "Brian's method" and in his absence they took no initiative.

Various other approaches were tried with little success over the years until a pattern emerged; some localities had caught on quite well and were teaching it to their neighbours without external prompting. To cut to the present day, the idea has been disseminated through existing local networks like churches, which form the banner of OTC. In each of the 53 localities, a few volunteers were called to learn as trainers who then identify their own interested trainees at no cost and pass on the knowledge through peer teaching. Initially seed was given as part of the first training but most people joined only for this reason and once they received it they abandoned the programme. Generally, trainers would have maybe five trainees who each have ten farmers to train, by the end of the season this number would reduce considerably, but the core was composed of those who truly saw the value of CF. As a principle now, nothing is given free except the knowledge and those who truly agree with it will carry it out, they have to source their own seed and equipment, in some cases they approach other farmers and pay back the seed at harvest time leaving no dependency.

What has emerged is that after two seasons of OTC, those who were sceptical have seen their peers out-produce them twice and have turned back, not to the programme, but the method, learning from those farmers who have been successful. While initially, the target for OTC was to reach 5 000, then 10, 20 and 40 000 and so on, it became clear that chasing numbers as most organisations do is not the right direction, what is essential is to reach a few good practitioners and through their "model" others identify the value in it for themselves and volunteer willingly without cohesion or 'participatory programmes' – the trouble is control. When we try to control and otherwise persuade people *'how to live'* we take away their "agency" – that is, learning by doing, making mistakes, improving, quitting, trying again and having

the power to decide which lessons to keep and which to discard, this is true development. In simple terms therefore, impact must be defined as value, when communities see the value of a research for them, then no cohesion or programmes are required. This applies to any community, it could be the business community, agencies, politicians etc all these are 'customers' of research, including poor communities. Therefore, as customers, it is their right to identify what they value, and once that value is clear for them, the idea catches on like a fire. Therefore is doesn't matter if a project has billions of funding behind it, if the community sees no value, they will come for the billions and leave as soon as those are exhausted without ever accepting whatever idea is promoted.

As an approach, when dealing with new communities Brian asks them about their lives and as expected, they mostly complain about their hardships and their lack as they do with many NGO's. He then acknowledges their situation and while he empathises, he states clearly that he has nothing for them, not money, donations or incentives. Instead he in turn shares his story and the hardship he endured then explains how CF helped him out of a similar predicament and offers the knowledge to anyone willing to participate. It is critical that participants choose to take it on because not everyone wants to be a farmer, although the opportunity is presented to the community collectively. It is those who freely choose to take on and model the idea who are the true dispensers of it, some have even modified it to best suit their localities while others give it up along the way, as a free and open source it leaves the choice to the participants. Examples such as Mr Mpofu, a 75 year old disabled war veteran on a wheelchair out-produced and changed his community. He says that because with CF, most work is done while its dry he can wheel himself around his farm and do it himself. He taught an entire school single handed by offering the school kids 10 soccer balls, having succeeded, this roused their parents' interest and they too are asking him for the information. For the cost of 10 plastic balls, an entire community was changed simply because the practitioner knows how to approach them - a well funded external programme could not have achieved nearly half the result or as fast.

The most significant social "impact" of this work is that those who chose it have learnt ***to assert their agency*** and realise that they possess the capacity to reach any goal they set, not only farming as other auxiliary services have naturally emerged as opportunities present themselves this is beyond food security; it is true development in an agricultural context. This core of 11000 farmers achieved in two years is only the beginning. In Banket (Northern Zimbabwe) over 500 farmers have organised themselves and now support their trainers and each other through surplus they produce. This is not simply a matter of understanding "local knowledge" it is "local power" in action and the true engine of lasting "impact".

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